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RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 0038
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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH VENEZUELAN CIVAIR AUTHORITIES

This message is sensitive but unclassified, please treat accordingly.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On October 10, Econoffs met with the president and representatives of the National Civil Aviation Institute (INAC) to discuss various pending aviation issues. The group discussed formalizing a Federal Air Marshals program in Venezuela, rumors about Caracas-Tehran-Damascus flights, Venezuela's bilateral aviation agreements, reaching out to Boeing, visa issues and the status of Venezuelan carriers' request to fly to the U.S. with their own aircraft.
END SUMMARY.

Federal Air Marshals

2. (SBU) On October 10, EconCouns and EconOff met with a team from Venezuela's Civil Aviation Institute (INAC), including its president, Col. Francisco Paz Fleitas. Over the last two years, Post has sent three diplomatic notes asking the BRV to formally allow Federal Air Marshals (FAMS) to board flights to/from Venezuela, but has received no response. (Note: FAMS operated in Venezuela in the past, under an informal agreement with the BRV. End Note). INAC's legal counsel explained that Venezuelan law strictly prohibited carrying weapons on board an aircraft without a permit, which is only granted in very exceptional circumstances. Paz Fleitas said that INAC would study ICAO guidelines to see if Venezuela could revise internal regulations and adopt the program, and agreed that it was important to cooperate on aviation security. EconCouns noted that the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) would be willing to send down an expert to explain the program's details. Paz Fleitas said he would study the issue, and would prepare a written response.

13. (SBU) During Iranian President Ahmadinejad's visit in September, the state-owned carrier, Conviaza, and Air Iran signed a code share agreement to operate flights between Caracas and Tehran. During an October 7 tourism fair in Caracas, EconOff spoke to an Iran Air representative who said that the flight would be operative in November. EconOff asked INAC's representatives if these routes were indeed going to operate next month. They chuckled and said they had not received any formal request from the airline and that the timeline was unrealistic.

14. (SBU) Freddy Charris, INAC's Economics and Statistics Manager, confirmed that there are no current Caracas-Tehran or Caracas-Damascus routes, and again debunked press reports these routes could be approved within the calendar year. INAC officials noted that as Conviaza didn't have aircraft capable of operating such a distance, the code-share would likely be on an Iran Air aircraft. Charris said the BRV is negotiating a number of bilateral aviation agreements with countries in the middle east, including Iran, Syria, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

Getting cozier with the U.S.

15. (SBU) David Isea, INAC's General Security Manager, outlined the BRV's desire to do more business with Boeing, and develop Venezuela as a strong market. He outlined INAC's "transformational plan" to turn Venezuelan air services into

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a full-blown industry, and asked for assistance in reaching out further to Boeing. Isea mentioned that Venezuelan carriers had attempted to negotiate wet-leased aircraft from U.S. companies but had been turned down (presumably because the carrier was Venezuelan). (Note: Wet-lease companies' reticence to operate in Venezuela likely stems from difficulties in obtaining U.S. dollars from the Foreign Exchange Board (CADIVI) to pay for air services. End Note.)

16. (SBU) Isea also emphasized the continuing need for INAC representatives to travel to the United States, both to secure the relationship with Boeing and for inspector training. He expressed frustration with the limited validity of the visas issued for this purpose, and the need for a new diplomatic note each time a visa was requested. EconOff explained that our policy had come to this due to reciprocity, and that Post had approached the Ministry of External Relations (MRE) repeatedly on the broader reciprocity issue. INAC's representatives understood, and expressed frustration with the MRE's position and their inefficiency when issuing diplomatic notes for INAC travel.

17. (SBU) INAC's representatives did not inquire expressly about Venezuelan carriers' requests to fly their own aircraft and crews to the United States following Venezuela's upgrade to Category 1 earlier this year. However, when the issue arose later in the meeting, they were pleased to hear that Aeropostal's application was progressing and that the airline would likely be notified soon on the request.

Comment

18. (SBU) Unlike the last formal meeting with INAC (over the Category 1 issue), this meeting's tone was positive and collegial. Charris asked that we establish a working level dialogue and communicate openly about aviation issues. INAC is keeping aviation issues at a technical level, it seems, and while the BRV is certainly developing relationships across the globe, INAC is not shying away from the U.S.

market or U.S. providers. Post will seek to maintain this
dialogue with INAC. End comment.

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